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DEPARTMENT FOR AF/FO AND AF/E

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SUBJECT: SOMALIA - President Sharif Stages Successful Mogadishu Visit

CLASSIFIED BY: Bob Patterson, Somalia Unit Counselor; REASON: 1.4(B), (D)

¶1. (C) Summary: Transitional Federal Government (TFG) President Sheikh Sharif led a broadly representative delegation to Mogadishu from February 7 - 10 and held a wide range of meetings, largely focused on security. Sharif used the visit to successfully encourage some members of the former Islamic Courts Union (ICU) to end their opposition to the Djibouti Process. Public reaction to the visit was excellent. A highlight was a rally of over one thousand Mogadishu residents that was capped by a symbolic gesture of reconciliation by the attendees. Contrary to some media reports, sources among the delegation who traveled to Mogadishu tell us that Sharif had no contact with al-Shabaab spokesman Mukhtar Robow or al-Shabaab's Hassan Turki. End summary.

A Warm Welcome

¶2. (C) From February 7 - 10, Transitional Federal Government (TFG) President Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed and seventeen other TFG officials, reportedly evenly divided between TFG and Alliance for the Re-liberation of Somalia (ARS) figures visited Mogadishu. Sharif reportedly received a red-carpet welcome on February 7 and announced on arrival that the goal of his trip was to consult with the Somali people about next steps in the Djibouti Process. Members of Sharif's delegation told us that President Sharif was pleasantly surprised to find Villa Somalia (the President's residence) had not been looted by allies of former President Abdullahi Yusuf after Yusuf's resignation. The delegation members told us this would not have been the case without AMISOM's presence. and Sharif publicly thanked AMISOM for its help in stabilizing Mogadishu.

¶3. (C) Sharif was protected by AMISOM's Ugandan troops throughout his visit. The delegation endured only one significant security incident, when approximately six mortars were lobbed onto the grounds of Villa Somalia. There were no casualties and only minor property damage. Sharif, certainly acutely aware of AMISOM's reputation among residents of Mogadishu for overreacting to insurgent attacks, ordered the AMISOM troops and other militias not to return fire. In a media interview, Sharif underlined his strategy not to respond militarily and instead sent security forces into the areas where the mortars originated. Mogadishu residents noted this restraint, giving Sharif a public relations victory and winning over a population anxious to see a new approach to security in the capital.

Diverse Set of Meetings, Focused on Security

¶4. (C) Sharif's many meetings focused on security, especially how it would be achieved in Mogadishu. We are told that he ordered the formation of temporary security sub-committees. The national committee was to be comprised of six TFG and six ARS figures. A Banadir regional committee was also to be formed. Sharif reportedly asked Abdullahi Boss, an MP and Minister of Defense under former President Yusuf, to remain in Mogadishu to coordinate these efforts.

¶5. (C) We are told that Sharif made an effort to reconcile with members of the Islamic Courts Union (ICU), including senior militia commanders Abdulkadir Omar Ali and Abdirahim Isse Adow. Sharif reportedly won their support after a series of three meetings. He held talks with civil society representatives whose delegation was led by the chairman of the recently-formed peace and security awareness team, Abdishakur Sheikh Ahmed (an IVP alumnus). Sharif also held consultations with business leaders, who pledged to support his government. Sharif also met with Mogadishu media figures, who were still recovering from the recent assassination, probably by al-Shabaab, of Horn Afrik Director Said Tahil Ahmed. The President reportedly encouraged them to persevere, and noted their essential role in the peace process. He described the journalists as "heroes" who bravely took part in the country's liberation.

¶6. (C) A member of the delegation that traveled to Mogadishu described Sharif's meetings with the Hawiye elders, who reportedly agreed to fully support Sharif on two conditions: that he declare Sharia law, and that he appoint a Marehan as prime minister. Contacts have told us that Sharif demurred, and the following day disappointed Marehan elders who came to him with the same request, but offered the Marehan a deputy prime minister slot. (Note:

Sharif appears ready to appoint a Darod as prime minister, in order to reduce lingering resentments in Puntland over Abdullahi Yusuf's resignation, and in order to assure the semi-autonomous region of Puntland that it has a key role in the reconciliation process.)

¶7. (C) The February 7 - 10 visit culminated in a public rally of over one thousand Mogadishu residents that was capped by a symbolic gesture of reconciliation among all attendees. Influential representatives from the TFG, leaders from various Mogadishu districts, ICU representatives, and AMISOM officers all addressed the crowd. The meeting was held at the former police academy and Sharif delivered the closing speech. Attendees describe to us a scene of a sea of Somalis clasping hands and articulating a newfound hope for Somalia.

Reportedly No MeetingWith Robow

¶8. (C) Our sources state that, contrary to media reports, Sharif did not meet personally with al-Shabaab spokesman Muhtar Robow during his Mogadishu visit. We understand that some members of Robow's group participated in the first prayer at Villa Somalia during the visit. Robow had reportedly deployed militias to Afgoye, but the militias did not engage directly with Sharif's security forces. Several members of the Mogadishu delegation confirmed to us that Sharif did not meet with al-Shabaab's Hassan al-Turki or with ARS -Asmara representative Omar Imam. Mogadishu-based contacts outside the TFG told us the same.

Public and Media Reaction

¶9. (C) The public received Sharif's visit very positively. Somalis took note that Sharif had returned to the capital almost immediately after his election, and the Islamists reportedly viewed this as an unpleasant surprise. The public also appeared to be taking the measure of Islamist public statements, including one that claimed that Ethiopian General Gabre had accompanied Sharif to Mogadishu. Media reaction was generally positive. Sharif held a press conference before departing for Djibouti and summarized his trip, focusing on the creation of the security committees. One contact expressed some disappointment with al-Jazeera, who he alleged gave noticeably more coverage of a press conference by ARS-Asmara representative Omar Imam than to the one held by President Sharif. The positive media reviews were echoed upon their return by TFG members like Deputy Prime Minister Ahmed Abdisalaam Aden, who were skeptical of Sheikh Sharif in the days immediately following his election.

SWAN

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